Tweets by @RickyPo

Richard Poynd
@RickyPo

Can't help but feel this post overlooks the fact that it is the research community that is responsible for the misbehaviour and fraud complained of, not Elsevier. Sure Elsevier could be more responsive and makes huge profits, but what of universities' responsibilities? @deevybee https://twitter.com/RickyPo/status/1460257093227847684

1h

Richard Poynd
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Monday, June 28, 2010

Free our data: For democracy's sake

The open data movement is growing apace. What better demonstration of this than news that the UK coalition government is making its Combined Online Information System (COINS) freely available on the Internet, inviting people not only to access the data but to re-use it too?

COINS, *The Guardian* newspaper points out, is one of the world's biggest government databases and provides, "the most detailed record of public spending imaginable. Some 24m individual spending items in a CSV file of 120GB presents a unique picture of how the [UK] government does its business."

For *The Guardian* the release of COINS marks a high point in a crusade it began in March 2006, when it published an article called "Give us back our crown jewels" and launched the Free Our Data campaign. Much has happened since. "What would have been unbelievable a few years ago is now commonplace," *The Guardian* boasted when reporting on the release of COINS.

Why did *The Guardian* start the Free Our Data campaign? Because it wanted to draw attention to the fact that governments and government agencies have been using taxpayers' money to create vast databases containing highly valuable information, and yet have made very little of this information publicly available.

Where the data has been made available access to it has generally been charged for. Moreover, it has usually been released under restrictive copyright licences prohibiting redistribution, and so preventing third parties from using it to create useful new services.

The end result, *The Guardian* believes, is that the number and variety of organisations able to make use of the data has been severely curtailed and innovation stifled. As the paper explains, "Making that data available for use for free — rather as commercial companies such as Amazon and Google do with their catalog and maps data — would vastly expand the range of services available."

And it is this argument that has become the rallying cry of the burgeoning open data movement.

But is it true? Is there evidence to demonstrate that by keeping publicly-funded data under wraps governments have been stifling innovation? And does the free availability of government data inevitably lead to a flowering of new information products and services?

The economic argument

In the hope of answering these questions Italian open data advocate Marco Fioretti will shortly be undertaking a research project in conjunction with the Laboratory of Economics and Management (LEM) at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa.

The project will form part of an EU-funded work package entitled "Open Data for an Open Society, itself part of a larger initiative called Dynamics of Institutions and Markets in Europe (DIME). DIME is sponsored by the 6th Framework Programme of the European Union.

Explaining the background to Fioretti's project the manager of DIME's open data package, and Associate Professor of Economics at the Sant'Anna School, Dr Giulio Bottazzi says: "We ran an open call for the assignment of part of the activity, specifically the design and realisation of a survey to help assess the present situation concerning the 'openness' of data management in public institutions. Dr Fioretti applied for and obtained the contract — essentially because of his CV and his publication record in the area of open source software and open document standards."

Importantly, Fioretti has a special interest in how better use can be made of public sector information (PSI). And he believes that simply making public data freely available is insufficient. It also needs to be made available using open standards and

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open licenses. In other words, making digital information freely available is only half the task. Unless it is released in non-proprietary formats, and licensed in a way that allows adaptation and re-use, its usefulness is significantly curtailed.

Fioretti plans to restrict his research to local government data, since he believes it is more likely to be consistent. As he explained recently to O'Reilly Media editor Andy Oram, "the structure of government projects and costs are more similar from one city to another — even across national EU borders — than from one national government to another."

The project will consist of three main phases. First, Fioretti will produce a report discussing the role of fully accessible and reusable digital raw data in an open society. This will be based on examples taken both from the European Union and the rest of the world.

Second, during the summer he will conduct an online survey — which will be hosted on the LEM website. The survey will aim to establish how many EU municipalities and regions are already making their raw data and procedures available by means of open standards and open licenses.

Finally, he will write a further report analysing the results of the survey, and providing some guidelines and best practices for improving full access to digital data.

The grant made available to Fioretti is a modest one — around €12,000 ($14,767), plus an additional €6,000 discretionary fund — but it would seem to be further evidence that the open data movement is gaining mindshare.

In the meantime Fioretti is very keen to hear about real-world examples involving local businesses — both those who have built a successful business (anywhere in the world) by exploiting the free availability of local government data, and those (in Europe) who have struggled to create a viable business as a result of the inaccessibility of this data.

Fioretti can be contacted on mfioretti@nexaima.net.

As noted, Fioretti's research will test the thesis of *The Guardian's* Free Our Data campaign — i.e. if governments make their data freely available will it encourage businesses to develop new value-added products? And will this in turn spur innovation and create new jobs? Essentially it is an economic argument.

Transparency

But we should not overlook the fact that there are other reasons for governments to open their databases to citizens. Indeed, some might argue that the economic argument should be seen as of secondary importance only. A far more compelling reason for "freeing our data", they might add, is that it increases government transparency, and so is an inherently democratic step to take.

To do him justice, while he appears to have prioritised the economic case in his project, Fioretti is not blind to the transparency argument. As he points out on his web site, in addition to providing access to valuable government-created information and encouraging innovation, open data makes it easier for citizens to monitor their government's activities and how their tax dollars are being spent. "Modern software technologies and data networks make it both possible and relatively inexpensive to publish online tenders, regulations, documents, procedures and many other raw public data, from digital maps to pollution measurements," he says. "Making this information really accessible, that is online, in open formats and under open licenses, can both improve transparency in government and foster local economical and cultural activities."

In putting the transparency case to O'Reilly's Andy Oram, Fioretti cited the planned construction of the Strait of Messina Bridge (at an estimated cost of €6.1 billion). When the government announces how many tax dollars it plans to spend on a project like this, Fioretti asked, how can the public know that the costs are reasonable if it does not have access to all the data?

Evidently in agreement with Fioretti, Oram expanded on the argument: "[C]ontracts must be very specific about the delivery of data that [a government] commissions — and not just the data, but the formulas and software used to calculate results. For instance, if a spreadsheet was used in calculating the cost of a project, the government should release the spreadsheet data and formulas to the public in an open format so that experts can check the calculations."

Certainly it was in the interests of transparency that the UK government released COINS. As the H M Treasury web site puts it, "The coalition agreement made clear that this Government believes in removing the cloak of secrecy from government and throwing open the doors of public bodies, enabling the public to hold politicians and public bodies to account. Nowhere is this truer than in being transparent about the way in which the Government spends your money. The release of COINS data is just the first step in the Government's commitment to data transparency on Government spending."

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Coming in the wake of the so-called "MPs' expenses scandal" in Britain, the UK government's decision is far from surprising. What that scandal clearly demonstrated was that Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation alone cannot provide adequate transparency about the way in which governments spend taxpayers' money.

Indeed, it was only after several legal challenges that the UK government eventually conceded the need to be more transparent about MPs' expenses in any case. Even then, it continued to prevaricate and it was only after an insider leaked data to the *Daily Telegraph* that the public become fully apprised of how irresponsibly British politicians had been spending taxpayer's money for their own personal gain — including using public money to help them fund unnecessary second homes, to buy toilet seats, duck houses etc. etc.

This suggests that it would be a serious mistake to limit the case for open data to the economic argument alone. Governments also need to open their databases so that the public can know exactly how its money is being spent, and exactly how well the government is managing the country on its behalf.

Participation

But there is a third — and arguably even more important — reason why governments should open their databases: Doing so will help citizens participate more directly in the government of their country, and at an important moment in history.

As the publisher Tim O'Reilly points out, if governments were to exploit the digital network effectively they could engage the public in the political process in ways never previously possible in a modern society. Citizens could, for instance, "crowdsource" social, political and economic problems, take over responsibility for tasks traditionally seen as the prerogative of the state (by means of what O'Reilly calls "citizen self-organisation"), and even play a direct role in political decision-making.

This would be a radical change. The traditional top-down model of government assumes that public participation in the political process is necessarily circumscribed, since in large analogue societies collective decision making does not scale. This has seen citizens consigned to simply casting their votes and then sitting back while politicians govern in their name. One consequence of this has been the emergence of a professional political class that now views itself as standing over and above citizens, who tend to be treated as inferior, or simply as children, rather than fellow citizens. Essentially the electorate has been infantilised.

Yet as O'Reilly points out, "government is, at bottom, a mechanism for collective action." And in the age of the Web it is possible to make the political process more horizontal and egalitarian. Rather than viewing government as a hierarchical system in which only elected officials (with the help of professional civil servants) come up with solutions, make decisions, and set the rules, government should now be viewed as a platform to facilitate collective action — much as the Web itself has become a platform across which multiple and diverse applications can run without fear or favour (as advocates of net neutrality like to put it, "all bits are equal").

For this reason, says O'Reilly, the key question for governments today should be, "How do you design a system in which all of the outcomes aren't specified beforehand, but instead evolve through interactions between government and its citizens, as a service provider enabling its user community?"

Clearly this would not be possible unless everyone had access to all the relevant data, much as those building web-based services need to know the protocols of the Web in order to participate in the network economy. This suggests that open data should not be viewed as the endgame, but a necessary precondition for something far more radical.

The necessary transition, however, is unlikely to occur naturally: just as the Web is only open because its designers created an open model, so creating an open platform for democratic governance would need to be a deliberate decision. And evidence suggests that politicians will resist greater openness and transparency, since it would require them to give up some of their traditional power and authority.

In this regard perhaps open government advocates have been somewhat naïve. When in 2008 Obama won the US presidential election, for instance, they assumed the battle had been won. Arguing that Obama's success was because his campaign had adopted the open source approach to electioneering pioneered by Howard Dean in 2004 (under the guiding hand of Joe Trippi) they anticipated that Obama introduce the same openness in the White House, and so revolutionise the way in which presidents govern in the US.

In fact, Obama appeared to promise as much. As he put it during the election campaign: "We must use all available technologies and methods to open up the federal government, creating a new level of transparency to change the way business is conducted in Washington, and giving Americans the chance to

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Followers

participate in government deliberations and decision making in ways that were not possible only a few years ago."

With that end in mind, Obama promised to post pending legislation online for comments. And on entering the White House he put his weekly addresses up on YouTube, oversaw the creation of a White House blog, and the launch of several federal web sites — including Data.gov — where the public could access "high value, machine readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch of the Federal Government".

Clearly open data was viewed as a given in a Government 2.0 environment.

Caught up in the excitement, *Newsweek* called it Government 2.0: "Instead of a one-way system in which government hands down laws and provides services to citizens, why not use the Internet to let citizens, corporations and civil organisation work together with elected officials to develop solutions?" it asked.

Within weeks of Obama's arrival in the White House, however, the promised transparency began to give way to traditional top-down government, secrecy, and back-room deals.

Earlier this year, for instance, Obama was accused of reneging on a promise to make his health care negotiations freely available on C-SPAN (The Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, also freely available on the Internet).

And a year after the launch of Data.gov the site was being derided for offering little more than "thoughtless data dumps".

In reality, concluded cynics, Obama had simply paid lip service to openness and transparency in order to gain power.

However, it is surely more complicated than that. As O'Reilly points out, "we can be misled by the notion of participation to think that it's limited to having government decision-makers 'get input' from citizens … It's a trap for outsiders to think that Government 2.0 is a way to use new technology to amplify the voices of citizens to influence those in power, and by insiders as a way to harness and channel those voices to advance their causes."

In the meantime, the gap between promise and delivery in the Obama administration appears to be widening. Earlier this month, for instance, the *New York Times* ran an article suggesting that the Obama administration is actually proving more, not less, secretive than previous ones — and cracking down on government leaks in an unprecedented manner. A recent case [in which an intelligence bureaucrat faces 10 felony charges for handing over classified documents to a blogger], the paper suggested, "epitomizes the politically charged debate over secrecy and democracy."

It added, "In 17 months in office, President Obama has already outdone every previous president in pursuing leak prosecutions. His administration has taken actions that might have provoked sharp political criticism for his predecessor, George W. Bush."

Dangerous times

What has gone wrong? In pondering on this question earlier this year the online magazine *Slate* listed a number of possible reasons — including the White House's use of poor technology, an inability to let go of the traditional top-down approach and, citing an article by Micah Sifry — the co-founder of the annual tech/politics conference Personal Democracy Forum — the possibility that much of the hype surrounding the Obama campaign's web savvy was hype and nothing else.

The disappointment of open government advocates was palpable at the 2010 Personal Democracy Forum earlier this month. Indeed, some have become sufficiently disenchanted that they have come to conclude that, rather than facilitating greater democracy, the Web is acting against it. For this reason, suggested co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) John Perry Barlow, those disappointed in Obama should blame the Internet, not the president.

"The political system has partly broken because of the Internet," he argued. "It's made it impossible to govern anything the size of the nation-state". As a consequence, he predicted, "We're going back to the city-state. The nation-state is ungovernably information-rich."

Those not steeped in the culture of American libertarianism will doubtless view Barlow's conclusion as little more than the dystopian fantasy of a cyber-guru who had expected so much more of the Internet. Certainly it runs counter to everything we have learned about the ability of the Web to cope with scale.

So what do we conclude? Is open data really only ever about job creation and innovation? Should we give up on the democratic potential of the Internet? Can we afford to?

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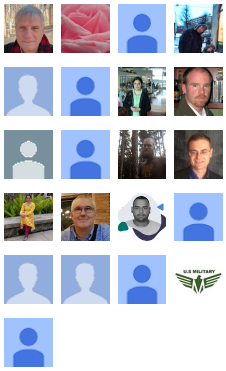

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Undoubtedly it is possible that governments could release more of their data without making a significant change to the traditional political system. Certainly we cannot rely on them to act in the best interests of their electorate; and so we cannot rely on them to become more transparent, or at least not without a great deal of pressure — much as British politicians had to be forced to change the way in which they managed their expenses system.

But as public cynicism grows the need for citizens to be brought into the political process in a more meaningful way could become pressing. Today's growing disenchanted with governments and politicians is a dangerous development — and comes at a critical historical moment.

For as governments around the world are forced to cut spending and raise taxes in response to the global financial crisis, citizens could become sufficiently alienated that political unrest begins to destabilise democratic governments.

Already we have seen pressure placed on the political stability of Greece, signs of incipient civil unrest in a number of other European countries (e.g. Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and doubtless soon in the UK in the wake of the new government's emergency budget). And the now routine protests at international forums like G-20 are a further reminder of how more and more citizens are becoming alienated from the political process.

The threat that the financial crisis poses to European democracies was highlighted recently by the President of the European Commission José Manuel Durão Barroso — who warned that crisis-hit countries in southern Europe could fall victim to military coups or popular uprisings as interest rates soar and public services collapse because their governments run out of money.

In short, these are dangerous times. So we cannot afford to retreat into Barlowesque libertarian fantasies. Rather we should be pointing out that opening up government databases is just the first necessary step for engaging citizens more effectively in the political decision-making process. After all, when people are involved in decision making they are more likely to buy into the proposed solutions — and that surely is the *raison d'être* for collective decision making.

Moreover, any solution emerging from citizens themselves is more likely to be a robust one. As Trippi points out in his book *The Revolution will not be Televised* (describing the Dean Campaign) some of the best ideas adopted by Dean came not from campaign insiders, but from ordinary citizens. "It became pretty obvious quickly that a couple of dozen sleep-deprived political junkies couldn't possibly match the brainpower and resourcefulness of six hundred thousand Americans," explains Trippi. "We couldn't see every hole and every flaw that they could see."

Likewise, describing Dean's radical decision to post details of the campaign's fund-raising on the Web, Trippi explains that the logic was to, "[I]nvite people in and open up the books. Give them the knowledge and information — how much money we wanted to raise — and they'd take the responsibility for it." And, he adds, they did take responsibility — as people do when you stop infantilising them.

Yes, governments should make their databases freely available to citizens. Yes, new businesses and services will doubtless be created as a result. Yes, that will surely benefit society at large. But open data should be viewed as merely a preliminary to a more far-reaching change in the way democracies are governed. The more important task is to re-engage citizens in the political process, and empower them to take part in collective decision making. That is not possible without open data, but open data alone will not make it happen.

In short, open data is a good cause to advocate, and Fioretti's initiative is both important and timely. But we need to broaden the discussion. It is not a topic that should be viewed exclusively through the lens of economics and entrepreneurship.

As such, the message to governments should be "Free our data: For democracy's sake".

Posted by Richard Poynder at 12:08

5 comments:

Unknown said...

i agree that the missing link is citizen empowerment - see also my post open data doesn't empower communities.

we need initiatives that support groups to wirte their own shared narratives using open data.

June 28, 2010 2:10 pm

Marco F. said...

First, thanks to Richard for mentioning my project!

Second, a service note: the email address linked in the article is copied by my original announcement of the project, but without the note "remove all digits before using it"...

HTH,
M. Fioretti

June 29, 2010 8:11 am

Richard Poynder said...

Marco,

Sorry about that.It should be fixed now.

Richard

June 29, 2010 8:43 am

Gnurkel said...

Thank you so much Richard, I thoroughly enjoyed your post. Your arguments about Open Data as an enabler for eGovernment (or whatever its name) was very well formulated.

You should also remember the importance of *private* data sources as an enabler for distributed power. Governments are not the only ones with power these days, companies are also rather influential.

By gathering and publishing data on companies (barcodes with linked data, value chains etc) one could empower consumers to make more informed choices, and make ethical and environmental consumerism the norm rather than the exception.

Contact me if you want to know more about our work in this field.
Keyword: Informed Individual

June 29, 2010 10:17 pm

Richard Poynder said...

Earlier today someone called Francesca left the following comment on this post. I deleted it by mistake, so I am posting it again (Sorry Francesca):

"I agree with everything that has been said. However, I am surprised how often, as the project at the University in Pisa confirms, legal issues are not brought into the picture; not only intellectual property rights like copyright and database right, but also data protection, confidentiality, liability etc. I think that to have a fully constructive debate on this issue, the entire spectrum of elements should be taken into account properly."

August 10, 2010 4:04 pm

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